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SUBJECT: UNRWA PROPOSES COMPROMISE ON WEST BANK PROTESTERS'
DEMANDS

REF: JERUSALEM 502

1. (SBU) Summary. Protests continue in all 19 West Bank Palestinian refugee camps over dissatisfaction with UNRWA assistance. UNRWA Acting Director for West Bank Operations Sami Mshasha told RefCoord April 3 that UNRWA has proposed a compromise to the camp committees to allow food distribution to proceed. End Summary.

UNRWA Faces Continued Protests;
May Compromise on Food Assistance

2. (SBU) The 19 West Bank refugee camp committees wrote UNRWA Commissioner General Karen AbuZayd on March 27 to announce protests every Wednesday at UNRWA West Bank facilities until their demands for UNRWA to assist all West Bank refugee camp residents, regardless of need, and rescind the decision to reduce food rations for larger families. UNRWA Acting Director for West Bank Operations Sami Mshasha told RefCoord that protests began on March 10 (reftel) and continued as of April 2 outside UNRWA's Hebron, Ramallah and Nablus offices, preventing UNRWA staff in Ramallah from reaching work. Mshasha said the protesters did not attempt to close camp schools or health clinics.

3. (SBU) In 2008 UNRWA reports it intends to distribute food to 35,000 West Bank refugee families four times throughout the year, a decrease from 2007's total distribution, when UNRWA provided food to 97,000 families twice. UNRWA told RefCoord that the reduction is in response to increased food and transportation costs, prompting an increase in cash assistance and access to the job creation program but a reduction in food distribution.

4. (SBU) In February, West Bank refugee camp committees rejected UNRWA's 2008 food distribution plan. UNRWA responded by proposing to increase the number of beneficiary families to 60,000, while reducing ration sizes for large families. The camp committees also rejected that proposal, and the planned February food distribution still has not taken place.

Compromise in the Works?

5. (SBU) UNRWA Chief of West Bank Relief Services Ziyad Faraj told RefCoord April 3 that, in response to the continued protests, UNRWA is proposing to increase food rations for refugee camp residents, but rations would be distributed three times a year, vice four, and camp residents would be less likely to receive cash assistance. UNRWA would still employ needs-based criteria for food distribution. (Note: A

ration includes 30 kg flour, 6 kg sugar, 4 kg lentils, 4 liters cooking oil, and 2 liters milk. End Note). According to UNRWA's latest proposal, food would be distributed as follows:

-- Camp Residents: Families with 1 to 3 people receive 1 ration; 4 to 6 people receive 1.5 rations; and more than 6 people receive 2 rations. Distributions will occur 3 times per year.

-- Non-Camp Residents: Families with 1 to 6 people receive 1 ration; and more than 7 people receive 2 rations. Distributions will occur 4 times per year.

16. (SBU) If the committees agree to the new plan, Faraj said UNRWA hopes the food distribution delayed since February will happen "within days." However, Mshasha expressed concern about the proposed compromise and argued that most refugee women, who manage households, prefer cash distributions over food assistance, because they can use the cash to extend their credit at local groceries and supplement their families' diets with food not included in the UNRWA ration.

WALLES